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View From the Top of the Military Ladder

Book World

SILENT MISSIONS.

By Vernon A. Walters

(Doubleday - 654 pp. \$12.95)

Reviewed by

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Vernon Walters came to national attention as one of the panoply of witnesses to parade before the Ervin Committee and a national television audience to testify about his Watergate involvement. Walters, a U.S. Army general, had been appointed deputy director of the CIA by Richard Nixon, and was used by Nixon and Haldeman (though not so much as Haldeman wished) in their attempts to cover up the Mexican money-laundering connection to the Watergate burglars. Walters came across at the time as a rather dull but well-prepared witness, a bit player in that political drama.

So it comes as a pleasant surprise to find that "Silent Mission," the account of Walters' life, is a well-written and often fascinating book about a man who, through his own talents mixed with some coincidence, was involved in some of the most interesting and important events of our time.

Vernon A. "Dick" Walters is a classic military success story. He enlisted as a private in 1941 and rose through the ranks, finally retiring as a major general in July of 1976. In part, his success was rooted in a childhood spent largely in France, where he learned and became fluent in French, Italian, Spanish and German.

His facility for languages brought him to the attention of military authorities soon after he was sworn in, and he was encouraged to apply to Officers Candidate School—the first of many steps up the military ladder. He was ordered overseas, landing with

an assault on French Morocco, where he was used to interrogate French-speaking prisoners of war. Later during the war, he served as American attache to the Brazilian forces fighting on the Allied side in Italy (he quickly picked up Portuguese as a sixth language) and as an aide to Gen. Mark Clark. With his many Brazilian contacts, he was sent after the war to the American Embassy in Brazil as assistant military attache. He served as a translator there to Gen. George Marshall and President Truman at the 1947 Pan American conference, and for the next three decades, his discretion, intelligence and interpreting skills were in heavy demand by America's top political and military figures.

As a translator, Walters worked for Averell Harriman during the administration of the Marshall Plan in Europe; went with Harry Truman to confront Gen. Douglas MacArthur at Wake Island in 1950 and with Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower to NATO in 1951; traveled to South America with Vice President Nixon in 1958 (he sat in the car next to Nixon during the famous rock-throwing incident in Venezuela), and translated on various occasions for Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon.

Over the years, he came to observe and know many of the key political figures of the 20th century, including de Gaulle, Tito, Franco, Mossadegh and Khrushchev, and he spent time in France, Italy, Brazil and Vietnam. He tells us a good deal about them all. In the most interesting part of his book, Walters describes in detail his role as secret intermediary, based in Paris, between the Chinese Communists and Henry Kissinger. He helped to arrange Nixon's stunning trip to China.

In a style that could only be called straightforward—short sentences, no flowery prose or strings of adjectives—Walters recounts events, describes people and gives his views. The book reads well, and Walters' droll sense of humor perfectly complements his writing style.

Walters is a man with strong political views with which many if not most readers may disagree. He remains a passionate proponent of the American involvement in Vietnam, and in many places in "Silent Missions" defends or excuses right-wing dictatorships while vehemently castigating communist ones. But no matter. Walters is an honest man with a fine eye for detail and a talent for telling a story. His book makes interesting and worthwhile reading to anyone interested in American politics and history.

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